

John P. Dimoia, *Reconstructing Bodies: Biomedicine, Health, and Nation Building in South Korea since 1945*, Stanford: Stanford University Press (Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, Columbia University), 2013, 296 pp.

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American nation building in South Korea was a complex and multifaceted process. During the three decades after the Korean War the United States played a key role in shaping the country's economy, culture, and politics. This was achieved through billions of dollars of economic aid, the dispatch of numerous American advisors, and the promotion of different kinds of scientific and cultural exchange between the two countries. John P. DiMoia's very welcome recent book, *Reconstructing Bodies* finds another fascinating dimension of American nation building which has been neglected for far too long: U.S. efforts to build up the Republic of Korea's (ROK) medical infrastructure. The book tells the intriguing story of how South Koreans not only came to embrace physically interventionist medicine but also turned their country into one of the world's leaders in plastic and elective surgery.

Reconstructing Bodies is broken down into six chapters. Although the chapters generally follow each other chronologically, each one covers an individual case study. The case studies themselves are quite varied and, as a result, the continuity between the chapters is not always seamless. The author is nevertheless persuasive that each of the subjects that he brings up is worthy of study and evaluation. Taken together they present a view of the development of science and biomedicine in post-1953 South Korea that is at times a bit piecemeal but still richly detailed and interesting. While other scholars have touched on some of the issues covered in DiMoia's case studies, the majority of the issues he covers are fresh and original.

The author begins with an examination of biomedicine before the U.S. Occupation of South Korea. At this time, modern medicine existed but only in a very fragmented form. Traditional medicine was still much more important and influential. To demonstrate this point, DiMoia examines the career of Byung Sang-Hun, a prominent specialist in traditional medicine. Such practitioners thrived during the colonial period but their futures

started to look more uncertain once American forces occupied the southern half of the Korean peninsula in 1945.

The author then turns to the establishment of the U.S. Army Military Government in Korea (often abbreviated as USAMGIK) in 1945 and examines how American forces helped to introduce a new medical infrastructure. The occupation focused many of its efforts on disease control and undertook significant interventions to prevent the spread and outbreak of diseases. DiMoia devotes particular attention to the occupation's response to a cholera outbreak that occurred during the summer of 1946. USAMGIK attempted to deal with this crisis by introducing mass inoculations. These policies marked a rather dramatic change in how disease epidemics were understood and dealt with in Korea.

The third chapter covers the Korean War and its aftermath, focusing primarily on the years between 1951 and 1960. This was a time of abject poverty in South Korea due to the wide-scale destruction of infrastructure, homes, and schools that occurred during the war. DiMoia traces how medicine was part of a broader effort launched by the United States and the United Nations to help South Korea recover from this horrific conflict. He does so through focusing closely on the partnership formed between Seoul National University (SNU) and the University of Minnesota between 1954 and 1962. As the reviewer has written about elsewhere, this was one of numerous collaborative ventures between South Korean and American universities during this period.⁴ This chapter includes some very original and interesting material on the establishment of open-heart surgery at SNU. As DiMoia notes, however, the changes in South Korean medicine brought about by collaborations such as the one between SNU and Minnesota were not immediately accepted or welcomed by all South Koreans.

Understandings of health and the body in South Korea started to change more rapidly after 1961. The year 1961 brought a military coup and the emergence of a new government under Park Chung Hee that was intent on bringing about the country's modern transformation. One aspect of this was more large-scale initiatives in the field of public health. Chapter 4 covers the family planning and birth control campaigns undertaken by the South Korean government during the 1960s and 1970s. DiMoia finds that these campaigns were successful from a strictly statistical standpoint. At the same time, however, there were many tensions involved in their implementation as South Koreans were forced to cede some control over their bodies to the state.

The fifth chapter covers another target of the state's public health campaigns—parasites. DiMoia describes how new measures implemented

⁴ Gregg Brazinsky, *Nation Building in South Korea: Koreans, Americans, and the Making of a Democracy* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2007).

by the ROK government in 1965 required a generation of South Korean school children to bring their stool samples to school for analysis. Along with this, went a new medical infrastructure that was necessary for analyzing the samples and eliminating the parasites as well as the introduction of new pharmaceuticals. The chapter also covers the deployment of South Korean forces in Vietnam where, according to DiMoia, parasites were a significant problem. Ultimately, the anti-parasite campaigns served to further extend the reach of the state.

The final chapter examines plastic and aesthetic surgery in contemporary South Korea, where blepharoplasty and other procedures have become extremely common in recent years. As the country has reached new levels of economic prosperity, Koreans have gained more disposable income, which they often choose to spend on elective surgery. While few will be surprised to hear about South Korea's plastic surgery boom, DiMoia's excavation of the historical roots of some procedures allows one to see the current popularity of plastic surgery from a new perspective. For instance, variants of blepharoplasty, the most popular form of aesthetic eye surgery, were practiced in Japan as early as the late nineteenth century.

One particular strength that is evident throughout these chapters is DiMoia's excellent research. The author makes use of a wealth of new materials drawn from American archives and the personal records of some key South Korean figures in the biomedical field. DiMoia proved quite resourceful not only in going through relatively well-known archival collections in the United States but also in ferreting interesting materials out of the collections of numerous hospitals and medical institutes in South Korea. The book stands as a fine example of multi-national, multi-archival research.

DiMoia's conclusion is somewhat ambivalent about the moral implications of the story laid out in the book's sweeping narrative. On the one hand, the author acknowledges that "South Korea has successfully transformed itself." On the other hand he believes that the story is not really a "progressive narrative of democratization and greater access to health care." (p. 226) Instead, he argues, the development of biomedicine in South Korea more closely resembled "a narrative of state-sanctioned violence in the form of bodily intervention, with the combined potential of an ambitious social science and an aggressive biomedicine reaching directly into South Korean offices, homes, and villages." (p. 226). DiMoia's judgment about the Park Chung Hee regime may be a little bit too harsh here. It is unquestionably true that the state used biomedicine to quite literally extend its authority of the bodies of its citizens. But where was the violence that he speaks of? Although the Park regime certainly deployed more than its fair share of brutality when it came to policing and suppressing dissent, the expansion of state authority through biomedicine seems

almost mild by comparison. Moreover, it unquestionably did work to improve the overall health, wellbeing, and life expectancy of South Korea's citizens. In the end, the true meaning and legacy of this rapid expansion of biomedicine in the Republic of Korea is something that only Koreans themselves will be able to judge.